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ABSTRACT

Independent learning, supported by a learning contract, is a viable option for college English courses. The learning contract states the student's general educational purposes, specific purposes of the contract, learning activities to be undertaken, and evaluation criteria. Each student meets with the instructor individually to set time goals and plan a course of study. Students take responsibility for their own learning, and the instructor must learn to adapt to the role of facilitator and mentor. Contract learning provides many avenues for student/instructor creativity, because students can pursue the study of literature that relates to their own specific interests. The quality of student work improves when it is connected to a primary goal or interest, and students experience satisfaction in working independently, as shown by their evaluatory comments. (GW)

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INDEPENDENT LEARNING:

THE USES OF THE CONTRACT IN ENGLISH

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With class size growing, number of sections taught being augmented, and writing requirements for Freshman Composition being enforced more systematically, college English instructors are overwhelmed, even threatened, at suggestions from their administrators that they do an independent study with still another student. The shifting college population, however, signals a change that administrators and teachers cannot ignore. A working student or a homebound mother cannot attend traditionally scheduled classes; an older student resists competing with a younger student in a classroom. With the current decline in enrollment of students between the ages of 18 and 22, colleges are made aware daily of the need to serve other populations. Independent learning using the contract provides a useful alternative.

Independent learning and individualized instruction are philosophically disparate approaches. Individualized instruction conjures up images of a single preparation for a single student - - an impossible undertaking for a busy teacher. Independent learning, supported by a learning contract or agreement, however, is a viable choice for both student and teacher. As the essential support, the learning contract states four important guidelines: the student's general educational purposes; the specific purposes of the particular contract being written; the actual learning activities to be undertaken; and finally the criteria by which the work will be evaluated. The sample contract form on the next page serves as a guide.

The section on general educational purposes can include a brief statement of the student's goals: "I work in a day care

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SAMPLE CONTRACT FORM

Student's Name_____ Contract Begins_____

Address_____ Contract Ends_____

_____ Amount of Credit_____

Telephone No._____

Instructor's Name_____

Office Room No._____

Phone Ext. No._____

GENERAL EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES:

SPECIFIC EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES OF THIS CONTRACT:

LEARNING ACTIVITIES:

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION:

Signatures: Instructor_____ Date_____

Student_____ Date_____

center and am interested in early childhood education; I would like to achieve a Bachelor's degree in psychology." If the student is able to articulate the overall educational plan for the instructor, ideas for the specific purposes of the contract, which follow, have been given parameters. Thus the next section, specific purposes, can state: "To study the image of the child in English and American literature." The learning activities section includes bibliographies, questions to be addressed, topics to be explored, papers to be written, tests or essays assigned. In the absence of class lectures, standard texts can and should be supplemented by critical editions, taped lectures, public television series, continuing education courses, journals and periodicals, resources in the community, field work experiences - - the resources are limited only by the degree of ingenuity and creativity of both instructor and student. Actual work to be produced, e.g. research paper, series of smaller papers, take-home essay, intellectual and/or experiential log, is specified so that the student has a clear idea of how to proceed. The final section of the contract, specifying evaluative criteria, helps the student to understand the bases on which s/he will be evaluated, what level of learning the instructor will expect. When the contract is clearly written, it becomes a reassuring resource to both instructor and student, providing a comfortable degree of structure in a non-structured situation. It is a reminder of work done or undone, a checklist for accomplishments, a springboard for discussions during meetings, an ongoing guide. It is not ironclad; amendments can be written, or the final evaluation can reflect changes in the learning activities.

The time span allowed for the learning provides still another

area of flexibility for non-traditional students. In most cases, the college semester calendar is the necessary guide, since grades must be entered at specific times of the year. If an interdisciplinary or larger contract, such as a 6 or 8 credit study is planned, the contract dates can be expanded to encompass two semesters, or can be condensed if the student has the time for a heavier amount of work. If, on the other hand, a student wants to do a component part or a small study, 2 credits for example, less time can be allowed. The student generally sets reasonable time goals. A three month or 15 week period allows even a working man or woman the time to complete an independent learning contract in literature which would be equivalent to the best 3 or 4 credit course. The deadlines of the registrar or the eccentricities of the computer frame the time span allowed for the study more often than not.

A few practical considerations can be helpful. A student appears in your office, one whose work prevents him from attending class. He would like to work out an independent study. The dialogue begins. What are the student's interests, goals, talents? Is the person a beginning or a mature student? Has he a facility with the written word? What is the level of learning on which to proceed? The best approach is to listen, suggest, and resist closure. The contract need not be written at the first meeting. Jot down tentative ideas, which will generate for a couple of weeks. You will be thinking about them at odd moments. The student will be starting some of the reading and some of the learning activities. At the second meeting, both student and instructor have clarified ideas and goals. Now is the time to polish the contract, to add or subtract from the bibliography, to review the learning activities,

to prepare the final form of the contract. The number and length of the remaining meetings, before the contract time is over, are planned. Sometimes the student can function independently, and will need only a final meeting at which time either oral assessment, open discussion of the content of a paper, or some other summation and evaluation of what has been learned takes place. Other times it is important to see the first draft of a paper, if this paper is the only product of the learning. Still other times, a half-hour meeting can spur the student on, re-direct him if he has strayed from the purpose, encourage him in his early writing and thinking, or stimulate him with a single new idea. Instinct will be the best guide in knowing what, and how much the student needs. The contract, however, is the essential support for the independent learning.

It is essential at this point to return to the differences between independent learning and individualized instruction. In a face-to-face meeting across a desk, the roles of teacher and student are quite different; no lectern separates, no lecture is possible, no skillfully worded question thrown out to a class can generate discussion. Instead there is an honest encounter between two people meeting to plan and pursue a course of study. Sometimes the student has no idea where to start; sometimes the instructor has no idea where to start. But student and instructor ignite each other, and between them grows an idea. The real strength of the faculty member is in understanding process: how to go about designing a study; how to locate appropriate sources; the relative importance of background materials; the underlying questions of cultural, intellectual, and philosophical significance. Flexibility, and the admission that one cannot and does not have to be an expert in everything, are the bases on which an instructor in an independent

learning contract begins. The student thus feels a larger responsibility for her own learning, since she knows now that she cannot depend upon wisdom imparted through lectures, recorded in a notebook, and studied in preparation for a final exam.

The instructor is more often the facilitator, the guide, the mentor, who helps the student to design his or her study, to locate the sources, to suggest books, and to add to the encounter from the wealth of knowledge the instructor has stored up. But the responsibility for the planning, for narrowing the search, for finding the appropriate books to read, is largely the student's. Thus the student learns not only what to learn but how to learn: how to use the library, how to begin to research, how to find sources, how, in fact, to be an independent learner. The experience of learning comes to feel organic, experienced, instead of imposed, and not taking place at a certain time in a certain setting. Sylvia Ashton Warner (Teacher, 1963) makes the distinction beautifully: teaching is imposition, she claims, and knowledge cannot be imposed. The more material presented to students, the less pull on their own resources; learning should move from the inner person outward, from the known to the unknown.

When students learn how to learn, as opposed to what to learn, they become "inner directed" as opposed to "other directed" (David Reisman, The Lonely Crowd, 1960). They come to associate learning with something they are in charge of. No longer dependent upon the instructor, the student becomes more self-reliant, more disciplined, more independent. It seems highly plausible to assume that such a student remains a life-long learner.

All of this seems very threatening when one is accustomed to

being a classroom teacher; I too have felt the heady exhilaration of being the performer in a classroom, when what I brought with me "worked" and I knew the students shared my excitement. There is no substitute for a class well taught. An independent learning encounter, however, provides a different feeling of satisfaction and worth for the instructor. Carl Rogers provides the key to these new satisfactions when he applies his "client-centered" approach in therapy to "student centered" education. Although the questions posed by Rogers trigger discomfort, even displacement, some can be asked: Do I trust students to be self-directing? To choose their own resources, books, modes? Can being a facilitator, rather than a lecturer, satisfy my needs? Can I place myself in a situation where my role is to elicit another's strengths, rather than impose mine? Do I have the courage to give each learner honest feedback, face-to-face? Can I provide the psychological climate in which the learner can begin to take control of his/her own education? These questions are the pivots upon which a faculty member balances. Finding a degree of comfort with them opens the teacher to other satisfactions.

These considerations help one to perceive that although time is necessary for planning and meetings during the course of an independent learning contract, numbers of hours spent reading and giving instruction do not exist. Yes, often mentors at Empire State College, where independent learning contracts are used exclusively, declare, "I taught today!" Of course it is stimulating suddenly to find a student interested in D. H. Lawrence when, in fact, my thesis was written on him. It does feel good to unload my accumulated Lawrenciana. But the confession is that it is just as exhilarating

to work with a student who learns and grows through independence, and who is able, after a few weeks, to arrive at discoveries that are his, not mine, and are intensely valid.

There are many avenues for student/instructor creativity. One Empire State College student was a child care worker in a home where most of the inhabitants were either orphaned or came from families which were not intact. He decided to do a literature contract on the image of the child in literature, particularly the abandoned or orphaned child. He read Oedipus, Oliver Twist, Great Expectations, Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, The Turn of the Screw - - the reading list was full. To this list he added John Bowlby's seminal work Separation, so that the insights revealed in his small reaction and response papers, written at the completion of each book, were excellent. Broadening his reading for his final paper, he included critical sources. His daily work and his academic work blended into an intensely meaningful learning.

Another student at Empire State College, an imaginative thinker, wanted to combine a study of mythology and the Jungian theory of the archetype with a study of drama, from the Greeks to the moderns, tracing the recurrent characters. She compared Elektra in mythology and Greek drama with the Elektra portrayed by Strauss, O'Neill, and Giradoux. She studied Oedipus and Prometheus in much the same manner. As source materials she turned to Jung and Joseph Campbell. These books gave her the background necessary to write her comparative papers on the central characters and themes, as well as her final paper which utilized myth and Jungian theory in the analysis of the dramatic re-enactments of these archetypal images over thousands of years. In evaluating her paper, I asked a

psychology professor to give it a second reading and share her evaluation. This kind of exchange is invariably reciprocal. These examples of studies done through the contract mode are articulated to assure the reader of the flexibility that is possible, and the excitement of creativity that emerges.

As long as there is an independent study course number at the end of the English Department's offerings, creative ideas for contracts are limitless: a thematic study in literature; a limited genre study, such as contemporary poetry or the short story; a comparative study of the plays of Ibsen and Strindberg; the 18th century novel; a single author study; an interdisciplinary study; Jewish, Black, Italian, or Ethnic literature. The education and career plans of the student often shape the study. Thus the student moves from an intrinsic interest, such as business, to extrinsic studies, such as a learning contract on the image of business in literature, and reads Howell's Rise of Silas Lapham, Norris's The Pit, Sinclair's The Jungle, Cahan's Rise of David Levinsky. The student of gerontology studies Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilych," Tillie Olsen's "Tell Me A Riddle," Turgenev's Fathers and Sons, Balzac's Pere Goriot, Agee's Death in the Family. The journals, studies, projects, or papers that are accomplished by the student assume a unique and internal meaning because they are connected to a primary goal or interest. The quality of work produced is invariably better when this connectedness exists.

It is often difficult for us, as teachers and devotees of literature, to perceive that there are levels of reading and understanding that are as valid as what we are accustomed to teaching. But all of literature deals with characters, emotions, prejudices, values, growth, pain, morals, ethics. If Flaubert claimed of Emma

Bovary "C'est moi," then we too find our fantasies revealed in literature. Traditional modes of literary analysis dealing with theme, plot, imagery, can be uncovered in secondary and critical sources, but discovering in a character one's doppelgänger, comparing a character's emotional experience with one's own, help the student to enrich his or her understanding of literature and of life as well. Arthur Chickering, Empire State College Research Professor, suggests that the instructor and student of literature can ask: "Who are the Sammy Glicks and Willie Lomans where I work or live? . . . What plot are they playing out? And what is the novel I have lived so far and continue to create? Which character and conditions match my own? . . . What is the likely climax and denouement when my play has been staged?"

Independent learning is indeed academically sound and feasible. According to one student, independent learning at Empire State College

> seems to allow its students the freedom and responsibility to make their own educational choices and to incorporate an integrative and flexible approach toward learning, requiring active participation on the part of the student, rather than passive absorption of knowledge . . .

Another student, in commenting on his experience, discovered that:

> Learning is not the acquisition of facts, ideas, or skills, nor does the ability to follow orders and accept the word of one who 'should know' determine a good student. Rather, learning comes from a certain attitude . . . one which accepts new experiences, but is at the same time critical of this experience from an intellectual and moral standpoint; an attitude which is expansive while being integrative and, perhaps most important, seeks to recognize the truth.

Since independent learning utilizing the contract is the only method used at Empire State College, I feel somewhat apologetic about the gap which exists between my purposeful and enthusiastic

support and the time constraints with which traditional classroom teachers are faced. Work is added to the normal teaching load in taking on a student in independent learning. Yet I am convinced of two things: first, that declining enrollments, tighter budgets, and a more diverse college population are all combining to force colleges to review work loads and alternative approaches; and second, that independent learning is philosophically sound as well as practically expedient, as long as it is not conceived as instruction, but as learning. Finally, borrowing once more from Carl Rogers, I must remind myself and those of you who read this that although I am "converted" I will always leave place for students and faculty who desire traditional education.

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